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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effects of discriminatory interview questions on applicants' perceptions and intentions toward an organization. Participants included 118 graduate business students (59 percent male), average age of 31 with more than eight years of full-time work experience. Discriminatory questions addressed handicaps, plans for marriage and children, date of birth, and arrest records. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of six groups, with each group answering ten questions. A control group answered no discrimination questions, one group answered two such questions, and another group answered all four discriminatory questions. The gender of the interviewer was also varied. Results indicate that discriminatory interview questions increased subjects' negative perceptions of an organization in a number of ways: (1) the fairness with which the organization treats its employees; (2) the professionalism of the interviewer; (3) the evaluation of the interview; (4) the intention to recommend the organization to others; (5) the motivation to pursue a job offer; and (6) the intention to accept a job offer. However, the group which answered only two discrimination questions rated the fairness of employee treatment and the professionalism of the interviewer much higher than the group with all four discriminatory questions, suggesting a threshold of discrimination tolerance. Subjects responded less favorably to the female interviewer, and female interviewees were less optimistic both about receiving a job offer and about the organization's fair treatment of employees. (RJM)

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Discriminatory Questions and Applicant Reactions in the Employment Interview

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Abstract

A laboratory study was conducted to investigate the effects of discriminatory interview questions, interviewer and interviewee gender on subjects' perceptions and intentions toward the organization. Discriminatory interview questions had a negative effect on subject's ratings of the fairness with which the organization treats its employees, the professionalism of the interviewer, evaluation of the interview, intention to recommend the organization to others, motivation to pursue a job offer, and intention to accept a job offer. Subjects responded less favorably to the female interviewer, and female interviewees were less optimistic about receiving a job offer, and about the fairness of the organization's treatment of employees.

Discriminatory Questions and Applicant Reactions in the Employment Interview

Research on discrimination and bias in the employment interview has found that members of minority groups tend to receive negative evaluations (Arvey, 1979; Arvey & Faley, 1988). This should not be surprising as several studies have recently found that interviewers often request information from job applicants regarding their membership in a protected group (Keyton & Springston, 1992; Saunders, 1992; Saunders, Leck & Vitins, 1989; Saunders, Leck, & Vitins, 1990). Besides being potentially discriminatory, these information requests may also have a negative effect on applicant reactions and attitudes toward the interviewer and the organization. However, research on the employment interview has tended to concentrate on the effects of discrimination on selection decisions rather than applicant attitudes and decisions. While discrimination and bias in the interview is an important concern, it is also important to consider the effects of discriminatory interview questions on applicants' reactions, perceptions, and intentions to pursue employment in an organization. In addition to being discriminatory, questions of a discriminatory content may also undermine an organization's recruitment efforts by turning off qualified applicants.

Research on recruitment activities has found that recruitment interviewers can influence applicant attitudes and job choice decisions (Rynes, Heneman & Schwab, 1980). In their review of job applicant reactions to organizational recruitment activities, Rynes et al. concluded that "organizational recruiting activities do have an impact on applicant attitudes and behaviors" (p.536). While this conclusion has been supported by a growing number of studies, the recruitment activities investigated have been somewhat limited. Particularly absent is research on the content of the information asked during recruitment, and its effect on applicant attitudes and behaviors. This is surprising when one considers the enormous amount of research and effort that has been devoted to the development of structured interviews and job related selection tests. One might have expected greater research activity devoted to finding out how applicants respond to these practices. The emphasis of course has

overwhelmingly tended to be on the validity of these procedures. This emphasis represents the greater attention that has generally been accorded to selection and recruitment practices from an organizational rather than an individual perspective (Wanous, 1977).

The purpose of this paper is to bridge the gap in the literature on discrimination in the employment interview and research on recruiter effects by considering the effects of discriminatory information requests on applicant reactions in the employment interview.

Discriminatory Interview Questions

To date, only a few studies have investigated the extent to which organizations request discriminatory information in the employment interview. These studies all suggest that despite guidelines stating unfair and illegal preemployment inquiries, organizations continue to request information from job applicants regarding their membership in a protected group even when human rights legislation forbids it. For example, Jablin (1982) and Jablin and Tengler (1982) found that college placement directors perceived that approximately 5% of campus interviewers asked discriminatory questions during the interview. However, since many students are not aware of what questions are illegal (40%), and others do not complain about discrimination, the prevalence of discrimination in the campus interview is probably greater (Jablin, 1982). Jablin found that the discriminatory information requested was related to sex (34%), age (18%), national origin (16%), handicaps (12%), religion (11%), and race or color (9%). Scott, Pavlock and Lathan (1985) found that 22 of 312 accounting students reported that they had been asked interview questions that were illegal.

Saunders et al. (1990) asked recent graduates from universities in five jurisdictions in Canada about the questions they were asked by employers in their most recent application for employment. They found that over one-third of the employers requested information on age, marital status, and language abilities. Fewer employers requested information on race/ethnicity and religion. Further, this information was more likely to be gathered in jurisdictions with more general rather than specific legislation regarding the collection of this information. Saunders et al. also found that the majority of applicants provided this

information when they were asked. They were more likely to provide information on their age, marital status, and language than about religion and race/ethnicity.

Keyton and Springston (1992) asked organizations to indicate the types of questions they ask job applicants. They found that 96% of the organizations indicated that they would or might consider asking at least one of the discriminatory questions listed in the survey. The discriminatory questions most likely to be asked were arrest record and conviction (56%); age (47%); and handicaps (42%). Information on religion (5%) and race (5%) were among those least likely to be requested. Keyton and Springston concluded that even with legislation, a large majority of organizations continue to ask illegal and potentially discriminating questions during the selection process. However, no research to date has investigated the effects that these questions may have on applicant reactions, perceptions, and intentions toward the interview and the organization.

The Present Study

The present study was designed to investigate the effects of discriminatory interview questions on applicant's perceptions and intentions toward the organization. Since previous research on recruitment has found that the sex of the interviewer and the interviewee may be related to interviewee perceptions, we also examined the gender of the interviewer and the interviewee in order to investigate any interaction effects between discriminatory interview questions, interviewer gender, and interviewee gender. We expected to find main effects for discriminatory interview questions such that interviews with greater content of a discriminatory nature would have a negative effect on applicant perceptions and intentions toward the organization.

Method

The participants in this study were 118 graduate business students. The average age of subjects was 31; 59% were male; subjects reported an average of eight and half years of previous full-time work experience.

The study design consisted of a 3 x 2 x 2 corresponding to interview content,

interviewer gender, and interviewee gender. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of six groups. For interview content, each group consisted of ten interview questions. The control group did not contain any discriminatory questions. A second condition contained two discriminatory questions (handicaps and plans for marriage and children). The third condition contained four discriminatory questions (handicaps, plans for marriage and children, date of birth, and arrest record). The gender of the interviewer was manipulated by referring to the personnel manager as either John Anderson or Joan Anderson.

Subjects received a brochure which described the organization and the position openings. A brief description of their encounter with the personnel manager was also given. Subjects were asked to assume that they were about to be interviewed by the personnel manager and to answer the questions as they would in an actual interview. After answering the interview questions on the following pages, subjects completed a questionnaire with the dependent measures which included: organization attractiveness; recommending the organization to others; expectation of receiving a job offer; the fairness with which the organization treats its employees; the professionalism of the interviewer; evaluation of the interview; motivation to pursue a job offer at the organization; and intention to accept a job offer. The coefficient alphas were all reasonably high.

Results

The results of a 3 x 2 x 2 MANOVA revealed significant main effects for interview condition, $F = 2.36$ (16,192), $p < .01$, interviewer gender, $F = 2,11$ (8, 95), $p < .05$, and interviewee gender, $F = 2.06$ (8, 95), $p < .05$. However, none of the two-way or the three-way interactions were significant.

The univariate analyses for interview condition revealed significant results for organization recommendation, $F = 3.08$ (2, 102), $p < .05$, organization treatment of employees, $F = 9.48$ (2, 102), $p < .001$, professionalism of the interviewer, $F = 6.95$ (2, 102), $p < .001$, interview rating, F (2, 102), $p < .05$; motivation to pursue a job offer, $F = 6.96$ (2, 102), $p < .001$; and job acceptance intention, F (2, 102), $p < .05$. The results for job attractiveness approached conventional significance, $F = 2.73$ (2, 102), $p < .10$, while the

results for job offer expectation were nonsignificant.

The results of Student-Newman-Keuls tests revealed that ratings for organization recommendation and evaluation of the interview were significantly greater for the control group compared to the group with four discriminatory interview questions ($p < .05$). The ratings for the organization's treatment of employees, and the professionalism of the interviewer were greater for the control group and the group with two discriminatory questions compared to the group with four discriminatory questions ($p < .05$). And finally, for job acceptance intention and motivation to pursue a job offer, the ratings of the control group were significantly higher than both of the experimental groups ($p < .05$).

The results for interviewer gender revealed that the attractiveness of the organization, the motivation to pursue a job offer, and job acceptance intention were higher when the interviewer was a male ($p < .05$). For the gender of the interviewee, the results revealed that females had lower expectations of receiving a job offer ($p < .05$), evaluated the fairness of employee treatment lower ($p < .05$), and had moderately lower intentions to accept a job offer ($p < .10$).

Discussion

As expected, interview questions with a discriminatory content were found to result in negative perceptions of the organization, the interview, and the interviewer, as well as lower intentions to pursue a job offer and to accept one if offered. Subjects expectation of a job offer, however, was not influenced by the content of interview questions. Interestingly, in some cases the condition with two discriminatory questions did not have an adverse effect on the dependent measures compared to the control group. In fact, for the ratings of the fairness of employee treatment and the professionalism of the interviewer, the ratings for the group with two-discriminatory questions was significantly greater than the group with four-discriminatory questions. Thus, there may be a threshold of tolerance for which subjects are willing to accept discriminatory questions without responding negatively toward them. However, beyond this threshold subjects may react strongly against them by refusing to pursue employment with an organization.

Although none of the interactions were significant, several unexpected main effects occurred for the gender of the interviewer and the interviewee. With respect to the interviewer, the results confirm some previous findings that found lower ratings of organizational attractiveness when the interviewer was female (Taylor & Bergmann, 1987). In the present study, the female interviewer resulted in lower ratings of organization attractiveness, and intention to pursue and accept a job offer. The results for interviewee gender are consistent with research that has found females to have lower self-efficacy especially for traditional male occupations. In the present study, female subjects had lower expectations of receiving a job offer. Female subjects also rated the organization lower with respect to the fairness of employee treatment, and moderately lower for job acceptance intention.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of the present study suggest that discriminatory questions in the interview may cause applicants to perceive the interview and the organization less favorably than they might have otherwise. While these results should be interpreted with caution given the laboratory simulation methodology, they do suggest that interviewers should carefully review their interviewing practices and questions if they are to avoid creating a negative impression of themselves and the organization. Otherwise they may unknowingly be sending warning signals to qualified recruits who begin to think twice about pursuing and accepting a job in the organization (Rynes, Bretz, & Gerhart, 1991).